



Swimming doves in Mauritius

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Deux observations sont rapportées de la Tourterelle peinte (Pigeon de Madagascar) *Streptopelia picturata* se posant en mer à l'intérieur d'un récif de corail devant la côte de l'île Maurice. Les observations ont été réalisées près d'un îlot de corail abritant un dortoir de l'espèce. Un comportement similaire est décrit pour plusieurs autres espèces de pigeons et tourterelles. L'auteur suggère que ce comportement pourrait peut-être servir aux oiseaux à se débarrasser de parasites.

On 20 March 2000, I was on the Île Aux Aigrette, a coral island south-east of Mauritius, watching doves flying from the mainland to the islet to roost. At 15.00 hrs I observed a single dove, flying low over the sea, in the direction of the island. When 10–15 m from the island, it slowed and descended onto the water, where it held its wings closed, or partially closed, and did not appear to attempt to become airborne. I swam towards it, but when I was within 1 m it easily flew off to the island, landing on the shore. It was either a Barred Ground Dove *Geopelia striata* or Madagascar Turtle Dove *Streptopelia picturata*, both of which are very common on both mainland Mauritius and Île Aux Aigrette.

Next day, I again watched the roosting doves in the hope of observing the same behaviour. Again, at 15.00 hrs, I saw a definite Madagascar Turtle Dove land on the water, in precisely the same manner as the previous day. This time, I was able to catch it, by diving within 3 m of the bird. It was in perfect condition, although the feathers were untidy—possibly owing to post-breeding moult—but not soaked. When I opened my hand, it flew off.

Possible explanations for this behaviour are few. Given that the distance from the mainland to the island is only 1 km, it appears unlikely that birds would need to rest en route. Many species of tropical pigeon are known to perform daily movements between mainland feeding sites and island roosting and breeding areas^{1,2}. Goodwin¹ also noted that many species of pigeon will settle on water, e.g. both Japanese Wood Pigeon *Columba janthina* and Japanese Green Pigeon *Treron sieboldii* (Des Allen *in litt* to Guy Kirwan, August 2000), but such behaviour is largely unexplained. Goodwin's observations of Woodpigeon *Columba palumbus* appeared to suggest that a trick of the light had led to the individuals

concerned mistaking the surface of the water for that of dry land, although Dave Buckingham (*in litt* to Guy Kirwan, August 2000) observed one land on water to avoid attacks by a pair of Peregrines *Falco peregrinus*. However, the former explanation does not appear to have been the case with my observations, where the bird(s) did not immediately attempt to become airborne upon realising their mistake. Andrew Easton (*in litt* to Guy Kirwan, August 2000) describes observing a feral pigeon *Columba livia*, in the UK, make a couple of attempts to settle on a fairly calm sea, 500 m from land, before, on the third attempt, settling successfully and floating very buoyantly. After c10 seconds of drifting with the tide it flew back to land. Willem-Pier Vellinga (*in litt* to Guy Kirwan, August 2000) observed two feral pigeons land on a large marsh, in the Netherlands, for 2–3 seconds before flying off. The reasons for these behaviours are also unknown. Buckingham has also observed feral pigeons visiting a pond, in Shropshire, UK, during a period of very hot weather, where they would rest on the water for several seconds at a time, perhaps for cooling purposes.

It is possible that the individual(s) concerned during the observations described above were taking advantage of 'a quick dip' to remove parasites. Similar behaviour has been observed in Honey Buzzards *Pernis ptilorhynchus* observed to land onto water, resting with open wings and then taking-off without difficulty, in the Red Sea on migration. Several Mauritius Kestrels *Falco punctatus* reintroduced to Mauritius were subsequently found dead on the water (Carl Jones pers comm).

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References

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Clamorous Reed Warblers *Acrocephalus stentoreus* nesting in maize

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La nidification de la Rousserolle stentor *Acrocephalus stentoreus* dans des champs de culture en Afrique est documentée pour la première fois. Les observations antérieures de l'espèce chantant dans des cultures en Egypte suggèrent qu'elle avait peut-être déjà niché dans ce milieu.

On 19–20 May 2000, I found five nests of Clamorous Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus stentoreus*, and c20 singing birds, in a mature maize crop, on Crocodile Island, in the River Nile, near Luxor, Egypt. The maize was just over 2 m high and occupied an area of c200 x 100 m. Each of the five nests contained 3–4 eggs. Two other individuals were observed carrying nesting material. A few days later the crop was cut and all the nests destroyed.

In previous years, in the same place, there were extensive stands of tall *Phragmites* in the channel between Crocodile Island and the east bank of the

Nile, in which Clamorous Reed Warbler was a common breeder. Local people informed me that the reeds had been cleared the previous winter; most remaining cover was, at the time of my visit, generally too low and flimsy to support nests of this species, which require 2–4 strong upright stems around which a nest can be woven. The mature maize was perfectly suitable for this purpose and was clearly being used as a substitute.

Nesting in crops does not appear to have been recorded in Africa¹. BWP² refers to birds singing, and evidently breeding, in maize in Tadzhikistan and to breeders feeding in crops near water in Western Australia. Goodman & Meininger³ refer to regular singing in sugar-cane fields and other crops, in Egypt, but not to nesting, although I suspect, given hindsight, that these records indicate breeding. ♀



Figure 1. Nest and eggs of Clamorous Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus stentoreus* in maize crop, in Egypt (Peter Castell)

References

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